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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 001500

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: DAS KROL MEETING WITH PRESIDENT
GURBANGULY BERDIMUHAMEDOV

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On November 17, Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov to discuss a variety of issues of bilateral interest, including Afghanistan, the Peace Corps, the former students at the American University of Central Asia, humanitarian overflight, and energy issues. Berdimuhamedov described his visit to New York for the UNGA as successful, including his meeting with the Secretary. He indicated that our annual request for renewal of humanitarian overflight would receive a positive response. He said that it would be better to have an international organization acting as peacekeepers in Afghanistan, rather than foreign military forces. Berdimuhamedov expressed his support for U.S. educational exchange programs, like Future Leaders Exchange Program (FLEX), and said that despite the fact that the fall 2009 intake of Peace Corps Volunteers was postponed, the Peace Corps program will continue in Turkmenistan. Regarding the Turkmen American Scholarship Program (TASP), the President said that there needed to be a framework agreement, which is signed with the Ministry of Education, for the students to be able to study in Bulgaria. Currently, the students are blocked from leaving the country for any reason, including visiting a relative in Russia. END SUMMARY.

NEW YORK VISIT WAS SUCCESSFUL

12. (C) Deputy Assistant Secretary George Krol met with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov on November 17 to discuss a variety of issues of bilateral interest in a warm and relaxed atmosphere. Following opening pleasantries, Berdimuhamedov noted the success of his visit to New York for the UNGA, including his productive meeting with the Secretary. He regretted there had not been enough time to discuss everything. However, it was clear that both sides understand each other and that there are important areas of cooperation. He asked Krol to pass his thanks to the Secretary for the kind note she had sent him, which he had recently received. Berdimuhamedov said the meeting with the U.S.-Turkmenistan Business Council (USTBC) had also been fruitful. He praised the USTBC Executive Director, whom he described as "very energetic." Berdimuhamedov said Turkmenistan is waiting for American companies to intensify

their work here, and that the Turkmen have great plans for further commercial cooperation.

AFGHANISTAN

¶3. (C) Turning to Afghanistan, Berdimuhamedov said he had discussed Afghanistan in his speech to the UN General Assembly in September. Afghanistan has problems. There is no economy, and people cannot work or study. In this conflict, it is not the Taliban who are suffering, but innocent women and children. He said that rather than the U.S. and European military, it would be better to have an international organization acting as a peacekeeping force. It is also important to change the mindset of young people. Berdimuhamedov noted that Turkmenistan can supply electricity for Afghanistan. For large parts of the country, there is no electricity. Therefore, factories cannot run, and there is no work.

EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES AND TASP STUDENTS

¶4. (C) Berdimuhamedov expressed his support for U.S. educational exchange programs, pointing in particular to the Future Leader Exchange Program (FLEX) for high school students and cooperation with American Councils (ACCELS), which administers many of the programs. He said the exchange programs will continue. He also said that FLEX operated under a good system, and without systems or frameworks there is chaos. He said there was no educational agreement with Kyrgyzstan, and conditions for Turkmen students there were awful. Berdimuhamedov claimed there was no electricity at

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night, and the food for students was of poor quality. Furthermore, students were majoring in subjects that were useless.

¶5. (C) Regarding the Turkmen American Scholarship Program (TASP) students, Berdimuhamedov said there needs to be a framework agreement, which is signed with the Ministry of Education, for the students to go to the American University in Bulgaria. He noted that more than 7,000 Turkmen students study abroad, so there is nothing wrong with studying in other countries. In fact, Turkmenistan often helps its students who participate in exchanges by providing transportation as well as assistance with currency exchange. However, they should not study useless subjects. Some students had been studying European economy. "Why would anyone study the European economy. They are in a crisis," he said. Turkmenistan needs its young people to study practical subjects like oil and gas, and law.

PEACE CORPS

¶6. (C) Berdimuhamedov said he was aware that the Turkmen side had requested the fall 2009 intake of Peace Corps volunteers be postponed. He assured that the Peace Corps program will continue in Turkmenistan. He cautioned that the numbers of volunteers should not exceed a total of 75.

HUMANITARIAN OVERFLIGHT RENEWAL

¶7. (C) Krol thanked Berdimuhamedov for his support for U.S. humanitarian overflights to Afghanistan, and said we were awaiting a positive response to our annual request for renewal. Berdimuhamedov said there was not even a need to raise this issue, and indicated a positive response would be forthcoming.

ENERGY ISSUES

¶8. (C) Krol expressed strong support for all U.S. companies currently working in Turkmenistan and those that want to enter the market. Berdimuhamedov said Turkmenistan is currently reviewing the proposals of several American companies, and has been encouraging companies to enter

refining, production of biofuels and other oil products. He said companies should enter the Turkmen market and proceed step-by-step. They should not expect all their goals to be reached immediately, but in the end the cooperation will be good for Turkmenistan and the United States.

¶9. (C) Regarding Honeywell, Berdimuhamedov said the company came to Turkmenistan "by surprise." It has worked through the Belgian company ENEX and had submitted a biofuels proposal through them. In addition, Honeywell was not at the USTBC meeting in New York. Nevertheless, they sent a letter later requesting a meeting. It appeared as if Honeywell did not want to work through proper channels. Berdimuhamedov said he was happy to hear from Krol that Honeywell also had U.S. Government support, like other American companies.

¶10. (C) Berdimuhamedov said that dialogue with Russia on gas will continue. The question of volume remains. In the meantime, Russia is free to export its own gas.

CASPIAN SEA/AZERBAIJAN

¶11. (C) Berdimuhamedov said he had spoken in the UN on the issue of the Caspian Sea. He noted that Turkmenistan did not have any real conflict with Azerbaijan. Ilhom Aliyev is a good person. There will always be contact between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan; relations will never go bad. However, he stressed, Serdar was 100% Turkmen. When he traveled to Baku, he had offered a good proposal to the Azeris. Turkmenistan believes in using a civilized approach to solving issues. However, since the Azeris were unwilling to follow such an approach, Berdimuhamedov decided that the

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issue must be submitted for arbitration. The matter will be resolved through arbitration. Nevertheless, the dialogue between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan continues.

WATER/REGIONAL ISSUES

¶12. (C) Berdimuhamedov said he attended the two UN Center for Preventive Diplomacy meetings in the region - in Bishkek and in Almaty. Both times the issue of water came up. The issues of water and electricity are linked in Central Asia. When a proposal on water-sharing was made, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan all agreed. Uzbekistan did not. The countries need to work together to regulate water. There is always a compromise to be found for both the water and electricity issues.

COMMENTS ON REFORM

¶13. (C) Berdimuhamedov said that Turkmenistan has a policy of open doors to foreign partners, and it is working well. The openings of the China and Iran pipelines will take place in December. Also, Russian President Medvedev will visit in December. The country appreciates American technology and has purchased tractors and combines from John Deere. It has also purchased from Boeing, Case New Holland, and others. Berdimuhamedov noted that there is still a lot of work to do domestically on reforms.

¶14. (C) COMMENT: The TASP students are currently blocked from leaving the country, even to visit a relative in Russia. Berdimuhamedov said having a framework agreement in place would be the key to solving the issue of these students, who, when blocked from studying at the American University in Central Asia, transferred to the American University in Bulgaria. We can hope, but there are already indications that it may not be so simple. END COMMENT.

¶15. (U) DAS Krol cleared this cable.
CURRAN